

The Abdication of Diocletian

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anxious suspense throughout the whole State/' * But his brain was never clearer than when he took final leave of his troops. His abdication was the culminating point of his policy. He had planned it twenty years before. He had kept it before his eyes throughout a long and busy reign. It was the completion of, the finishing touch to his great political system. It would have been perfectly easy for Diocletian to forswear himself. Probably very few of his contemporaries believed that he would fulfil his promise to abdicate after twenty years of reign. Kings talk of the allurements of retirement, but they usually cling to power as tenaciously as to life. The first Augustus had delighted to mystify his Ministers of State by speaking of restoring the Republic. He died an Emperor. Diocletian, alone of the Roman Emperors, laid down the sceptre when he was at the height of his glory. It was a hazardous experiment, but he was faithful to his principles. He thought it best for the world that its master should not grow old and feeble on the throne.

Constantine, of whom we have just caught a glimpse at the abdication of Diocletian, was born either in 273 or 274. The uncertainty attaching to the year of his birth attaches even more to its place. No one now believes that he was born in Britain— a pleasing fiction which was invented by English monks, who delighted to represent his mother Helena as the daughter of a British King, though they were quite at a loss where to locate his kingdom. The only foundation for this was a passage

* *JDe Mart. Per sec* ^ c. 17.